DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 194 935 CS 503 138

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TITLE The Rhetoric of the Marketplace: Salesmanship as Communication.
PUB DATE Nov 80
NOTE 9p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (66th, New York, NY, November 13-16, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Course Descriptions: *Curriculum Development: Higher Education: Integrated Activities: *Interdisciplinary Approach: *Persuasive Discourse: *Salesmanship: *Team Teaching

ABSTRACT

The concept of team teaching salesmanship demonstrates theoretical and practical relationships between speech communication and salesmanship. The challenge of maintaining intellectual integrity in the high risk, results-oriented environment of sales is met through attention to four major topic areas: the purpose of the communication, the salesman as source, the sales message, and the prospect as receiver. These topic areas are developed first from a theoretical perspective through lectures, examples from case studies and critical incidents, assigned readings, and application exercises. Students are encouraged to "learn" the theory not so much for its own sake as for its practical application. This integrated approach to the art of persuasion reinforces the common theoretical base shared by the disciplines and applies these principles to believable, "real world" situations. (RL)

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THE RHETORIC OF THE MARKETPLACE:

SALESMANSHIP AS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: The concept of team-teaching salesmanship, reported in this paper, demonstrates theoretical and practical relationships between speech communication and salesmanship. An integrated approach to the art of persuasion reinforces the common theoretical base shared by the disciplines and applies these principles to believable "real-world" situations.

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Lest we lose sight of speech communication's interface with other academic disciplines, we need only review the development of rhetorical theory in light of the attending contemporary theory in philosophy and the social sciences. And, when we look at the practice of rhetoric, we see it operative in the everyday world of human affairs--in politics; in law; in the marketplace; in our cultural and religious institutions. Despite Plato's derisive comments about rhetoric's lack of a distinct subject matter, a major strength of the discipline has been its ability to view--from a fresh and unique perspective--general principles derived from other disciplines; to integrate those principles; and, most critically, to synthesize theory, thus expanding and extending knowledge. A further challenge for speech communication has been to systematically apply that knowledge to the everyday affairs of humankind.

In expanding its parameters and its influence, speech communication must necessarily interface with a wide range of academic disciplines. One current area of interest is "business" or organizational communication. The recognition of the importance of communication in the practical world of work has stimulated theory and application in such diverse areas as channels of communication, interpersonal skills, and leadership strategies. And, the list goes on. This paper centers

on one of the more obvious areas for spanning the boundaries between business and speech communication, the relationship between salesmanship and communication. The locus--or more precisely, the connecting thread--is, the art of persuasion.

Specifically, this paper reports an approach to teaching salesmanship that integrates traditional marketing principles with communication theory. The medium used for uniting the two disciplines is a course in salesmanship, with academic credit given in a College of Commerce and Business Administration. Two professors developed and team-taught the course--a professor with experience and academic credentials in marketing and a speech communication professor. The initial objective was to add a "communication" component to a traditionally structured salesmanship course. As the planning progressed, that objective was modified to stress an integration of the communication perspective throughout the course--both in teaching materials and in course assignments. The results have been positive, evidenced both by student evaluations and peer review. Further, student demand for the course has increased each semester, a significant factor in a time of declining college enrollments.

From the communication perspective, the greatest challenge has been to make theoretical material practical and relevant to real-world situations (not only as a theorist, but as a translator and mediator--translating the language and conceptual framework of one discipline into those of another, and mediating between a predominantly academic, theoretical perspective and a patently practical view).

The challenge of maintaining intellectual integrity in a

high risk results-oriented environment has been met through attention to four major topic areas: the purpose of the communication; the salesman as source; the sales message and the prospect as receiver. These topic areas are developed first from a theoretical perspective both through lecture and assigned reading, second from examples from case studies and critical incidents, and third from application exercises.

Theoretical Constraints

Purpose

Obviously, the aim of selling is to influence behavior--to get someone to buy an idea, a product, or a service. Thus, major theories of persuasion are investigated, including motivation theory, balance theory, and learning theory. Learning theory is treated in terms of product benefits as well as stimuli to action. An effort is made to free as much of the theory from jargon as possible and to clarify theory through examples from sales situations.

Another area of interest related to purpose is high-pressure, manipulative selling vs. a helping relationship between salesman and prospect. Considerable time is thus spent on distinguishing between coercion and persuasion, determining the characteristics of each, and noting the respective tradeoffs of using each. Attention is also given to the ethics of persuasion and to the social responsibility of business.

Salesman as Source

Much of the discussion of the salesman as source centers on the issue of credibility. Students review current studies that set out dimensions and characteristics of credibility, and they investigate trade journals and business periodicals to determine the importance of credibility to selling.

Class discussion centers on the relationship between making a sale and company reputation, the salesman's reputation, product knowledge, trustworthiness, and dynamism.

Students also examine aspects of delivery and how they operate in sales situations. Eye contact, mannerisms, vocal dimensions, and nonverbal stimuli (time, space, and dress) are particularly stressed.

Lecture material focuses on specific strategies available to the salesman, including using questions, establishing common ground, determining the "best" order in which to present ideas, and resolving whether to present both sides of a question. Other tactics discussed include methods of tension reduction, ways of tying a product to the needs of the prospect, and methods of identifying with high credibility sources.

The Sales Message

Typically discussion of the sales message is introduced by setting out a simplified linear communication model patterned after Shannon and Weaver's paradigm. Used throughout the course as a reference point for moving back and forth between the disciplines (Source translates as Salesman; Receiver translates as Prospect, etc.), the model helps explain the theory in

terms of a specific interaction situation--the sales interview. Thus, the model reinforces the relationship between salesmanship and communication by providing a common framework for discussion. Description of the model leads to an analysis of interaction, and much time is spent on Berlo's levels of interaction and their implications for selling. Further, within the framework of the model, students investigate such communication "tools" as "active listening," questioning, paraphrasing, and summary as ways to determine what the sales message should be and "test" its understanding and/or impact, i.e. feedback.

Discussion of the sales message also includes specified reading and lecture materials as well as classroom exercises on perception, semantics, technical and nontechnical language, and the development of supporting materials--most particularly analogy, example, and testimony. Attention is also given to the development and use of visual aids.

The Prospect as Receiver

Discussion of the prospect as communicator centers on what we in speech communication call audience analysis. Students are expected--through specific exercises--to determine the physical and psychological needs, the self image, the frames of reference, the knowledge level, the fields of experience, and the pressures and priorities of the prospect with whom they deal in their trial sales. It then becomes their task, as "salesmen," to structure specific messages within the fields of experience of specific prospects. In short, the focus of the unit is audience-centered persuasion--both in analysis and application.

The students learn to tailor messages to specific problems uncovered by analysis of particular audiences; i.e., they construct sales messages for specific propsects.

Practical Application

Students are encouraged to "learn" the theory not so much for its own sake as for its practical application. Within the classroom setting, they present video-taped sales presentations that test communication skills and provide an opportunity for self evaluation. Further, students present sales meetings before their peers. Here they put into practice those theoretical principles discussed during the semester. Additionally, students prepare a detailed planning assignment, which requires analysis of product and prospect. This assignment gets at the heart of the "audience-centered nature of persuasion, and it requires the development of specific strategies for on-the-spot adaptation--i.e., for example, specific ways to handle the most commonly raised objections to the sale. Further, the planning assignment includes an analysis of features and benefits of the product and an identification of those features and benefits most readily adaptable to the particular prospect defined. Students also prepare a detailed sales meeting guide in which they develop materials for a second communicator to use. This particular assignment reinforces the need for careful analysis and points up the maxim that "words don't mean; people do." Both the planning assignment and the sales meeting guide require detailed visual materials.

Summary

Traditionally, rhetoric is an electic discipline--both in

theory and in its application. A challenge is to extend rhetoric's own theory and its effect in the real world by forging alliances with those disciplines with which we share certain commonalities. The area of business is currently receiving a great deal of interest from scholars in speech communication who see exciting new opportunities for interface. Within this area, salesmanship seems a particularly appropriate subject for investigation.

The concept of team-teaching salesmanship reported here, demonstrates theoretical and practical relationships between speech communication and selling. At base, both are concerned with the art of persuasion. Not only does an integrated approach reinforce the theoretical interrelationships between the disciplines, but it requires students to apply communication principles in simulated situations that are for them "real live world." Thus, by assuming cogency, speech communication gains increased credibility as a discipline.